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CIA House Assass. Ctr.

Was There a Plot on King?

Rumors that somebody paid to have Martin Luther King assassinated ten years ago are nothing new, but the one that appeared last week had an intriguing twist to it. According to a story in The New York Times, Russell G. Byers, 46, a sometime St. Louis auto-parts dealer who has had his own brushes with the law, recently told investigators for the House assassinations committee that in late 1966 or 1967 two Missouri businessmen offered him \$50,000 to arrange for King's murder. Byers said he turned them down and mentioned the offer to no one; both the businessmen are now dead. What interested investigators was that Byers's brother-in-law, John Spica, was serving a murder sentence at the time in the same prison as James Earl Ray, the man who later pleaded guilty to killing King.

Whatever the story's accuracy, it was the kind of thing bound to float into the open as the committee opens its first round of public hearings in two weeks on the assassination of King and, early next month, that of President John F. Kennedy. After spending \$5 million and about 39,000 man-days on its investigations, the committee is under pressure to produce some fresh tidbits, even if they don't add up to conspiracies, and almost no lead has been too wispy to track down.

Widows: The trouble is that the trails in both assassinations are so old and cold there seems almost no way to prove anything. Byers's story is a case in point. Committee investigators want to give Ray a lie-detector test this week in Tennessee's Brushy Mountain state prison, but through his lawyer he has already said he never heard of Byers and that he and Spica "never discussed" the murder of King. The widows of the Missourians who supposedly made the offer—businessman John R. Kauffmann and prominent patent attorney John H.

Sutherland—say they can't believe it.

Another line of inquiry involves Ray's own family. NEWSWEEK has learned that investigators are tracing money that flowed through bank accounts of Ray, his brothers John and Jerry, and his sister, Carol Ray Pepper. The trail has stretched from Birmingham to St. Louis to Wheeling, Ill., and investigators wonder if Ray's family might have financed his post-assassination wanderings.

Defected: In the Kennedy case, investigators have looked into the possibility that the CIA helped finance a book called "Marina and Lee"—in which author Priscilla McMillan concludes that Presidential assassin Lee Harvey Oswald could not have been part of a plot—as a way of covering up its own involvement with Oswald. (Harper & Row, the book's publisher, submitted an affidavit saving the CIA had nothing to do with it.) Taking the opposite tack, other committee staffers have sought a link between Oswald and the Soviet secret police—the KGB. CIA officers, who worked in Japan where Oswald was posted in the 1950s at an airbase, were asked for any evidence that the KGB might have recruited Oswald.

Even if none of the leads pan out, the hearings themselves could be quite a show, with Ray giving testimony from behind a glass shield or, possibly, in absentia through tape recordings. Witnesses in the Kennedy hearings may include Oswald's widow, Marina, and members of the Warren Commission—perhaps even former President Gerald R. Ford.

—DON HOLT with DAVID C. MARTIN and ELAINE SHANNON in Washington

~~SECRET~~ Marina & Lee
P. McMillan, Priscilla